

ARNOLD CARL KLEBS*

THE death of Arnold Carl Klebs, a distinguished American physician, in Nyon, Switzerland, on March 6, 1943, brings to a close a life of unusual achievement in medicine and medical bibliography. Known to comparatively few physicians of the present generation in America, his influence, nevertheless, was widespread among a small group of doctors particularly interested in medical history. As a specialist, moreover, he was a leading figure in this country at the turn of the century in the fight against the "great white plague." In later years his work as the bibliographer of the scientific and medical incunabula was deeply appreciated in scholarly circles. Klebs, like his predecessor, Conrad Gesner, kept his home open in Switzerland to a host of American visitors who found his delightful villa at Nyon, on the shore of Lake Geneva, a welcome resting place in their peregrinations about Europe. Many a weary doctor, exhausted from a great international congress, sought relaxation in this quiet retreat. One found, moreover, an energetic and active man ready to exchange ideas in a stimulating and brilliant manner, often prodding his friends to bring out the

*An exhibit of books, pamphlets and pictures having to do with Dr. Klebs is now on display in the rotunda of the Boston Medical Library.

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best that was in them, and at the same time adding to the conversation, based on a wealth of experience, a keen summary from his own mind. Klebs was, moreover, an ardent correspondent with physicians both in Europe and America. In modern times he must have had few equals, and his pungent, philosophic letters are now the treasured possessions of many who kept this literary and scientific bond throughout the passing years.

Son of Edwin Klebs,¹ an early student of pathology and the co-discoverer with Loeffler of the diphtheria bacillus, Klebs was born in Berne, Switzerland, on March 17, 1870. His early years were peripatetic for, before he received his medical degree at Basel in 1895, his father had held successive chairs in the universities at Berne, Würzburg, Prague, Zurich and Karlsruhe. Klebs became well grounded in the classics and spoke and read with equal facility German, French, Italian and English. One can hardly conceive of a training wider in scope, and as the years went by, he always stood out as an internationalist of the first degree. Because of his facility in languages, he could easily and quickly grasp facts and ideas difficult for many because of language deficiencies. His keen mind, moreover, seemed to miss little.

After receiving his medical degree² in 1895, Klebs served as an instructor in pathology in

Zurich, spent a summer as locum tenens at Vitznau and carried on some postgraduate studies at London and Paris. It was this thoroughly trained and brilliant student who came to America with his father in 1895. The elder Klebs first settled in Asheville, North Carolina, where he conducted laboratory and clinical investigation in a private tuberculosis sanatorium. Within a year, however, he was called to the chair of pathology at Rush Medical College in Chicago, a position that he held until 1900, when he returned to Europe. Before he left, his son, who in 1898 married Margaret Forbes, daughter of J. Malcolm Forbes, of Milton, Massachusetts, went to Chicago to practice, after having acted as head of a tuberculosis sanatorium in Citronelle, Alabama. He became a citizen of the United States in 1904 and remained in Chicago until 1909. During this period his main interests were in tuberculosis, and he soon became a recognized leader in the field. As director of the Chicago Tuberculosis Institute he was an ardent advocate of the open-air treatment, then an innovation, and he energetically supported the early work of Trudeau and others. Klebs's forceful personality was soon recognized by Billings, Musser, Jacobs, Osler and other students of tuberculosis throughout America. He worked hard, reading papers in various parts of the country, and finally culmi-

nated his endeavors in the editorship of a volume by American authors entitled *Tuberculosis*,³ published in 1909. As a background for this book he collected over three thousands reprints of articles on tuberculosis. These he carefully analyzed and published as a bibliography appended to the work. For authors he sought the best in the field, and contributions were forthcoming from Baldwin, Brown and Trudeau, of Saranac, Biggs, of New York, Coleman, of Augusta, Georgia, Minor, of Asheville, North Carolina, and Webb, of Colorado Springs. Unusually clear Roentgen plates for the time were furnished by Cole, of New York. This volume was the best summary in English of the subject in 1909 and still may be read with profit. Klebs kept his interest in tuberculosis after 1909, although he did not take an active part in the campaign against it except on rare occasions. At the Fifteenth International Congress on Hygiene and Demography, held at Washington in September, 1912, he served as vice-president of the Section on the Control of Infectious Diseases.

Before his retirement in 1909, Klebs had married for a second time, his first wife having died in 1899. He went to Switzerland to live, first at Ouchy-Lausanne, and later at Nyon. Although making his home abroad, Klebs made frequent visits to the United States, and indeed lived in

Washington during the period of World War I and in New York City subsequently for extended periods. Although he never forgot his adopted country, his heart was in his native Switzerland, and there at Nyon he established his library, using a small building on the grounds of his villa for this purpose. This two-story structure was literally lined with books and it became a true workshop of an intense, ardent spirit who exhibited, as few others have done, Osler's master word in medicine, "work." In this building, so delightfully situated, he deposited his father's books on pathology and allied subjects and assembled the apparatus necessary for his historical research.† Whatever he did, he did thoroughly, and each paper that came from his pen in later years was the result of many hours and even years of carefully planned research.

Klebs' first historical investigation concerned variolation, stemming from his father's interest in the subject. To his review of the subject,⁴ read before the Johns Hopkins Hospital Historical Club in 1912, he characteristically added a bibliography of six hundred items, and followed this with a paper in German on the same topic in 1914. This work brought him in contact with early American medicine: Zabdiel Boylston, Cotton

†Dr. Klebs's library will eventually be transferred to the Historical Library of Yale University School of Medicine, where it will be added to the Cushing-Fulton Collection.

Mather, New England and the Indians, subjects which continued to interest him throughout his life.

His next major work related to Leonardo da Vinci. He read a paper on da Vinci's anatomical studies⁵ before the Society of Medical History of Chicago in 1915, at the same time, no doubt, renewing his old friendships in that city. He was living in Washington at the time, working in the Army Medical Library, and had already started his studies on incunabula, using the collection in that library as the basis for his fundamental researches in this field. He began by cataloguing those at hand, and soon contributed some sound ideas regarding classification of incunabula in general.⁶ Klebs's scheme was widely adopted by librarians and cleared up many points in descriptive labeling. He was soon led to the fifteenth-century herbals, books scarcely recognized at the time as a distinctive group, and he compiled an extensive catalogue. He⁷ later wrote that he had "travelled thousands of miles to visit libraries, to consult numerous catalogues, had an endless correspondence, hundreds of photographs, only to complete and later to correct the data of my list." A similar list of plague tracts⁸ was made, followed by more extensive investigations with Sudhoff,⁹ published in 1926. These authoritative listings have now become the standard references to the

subjects and testify to Klebs's sound scholarship in both their completeness and accuracy.

Various papers on incunabula, appearing from 1926 to 1938, culminated in his classic short-title list of scientific and medical fifteenth-century books,¹⁰ a book constantly referred to by medical bibliographers throughout the world. It was to have been an introduction to a more extensive study, for Klebs had collected photographs and complete descriptions of over three thousand incunabula of medical or scientific interest, and this material lay in his library, ready to be brought to light, at the time of his death. Superbly ordered, it only awaits the final touches of some future scholar. The short-title list, however, is a royal monument to a man whose life was devoted to sound bibliographic research, and because of it, all scholars are grateful.

Some estimate of the affection and esteem with which Klebs was regarded can be gained from the number of papers published in his honor on his seventieth birthday in 1940. Because of the war most of his European friends were unable to contribute to a birthday volume; however, the Institute for the History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University issued a large, special number of its bulletin containing papers by his friends and associates.¹¹ Never a teacher or head of an institute,

he had no pupils in the usual sense of the word; but his influence was widespread, and he inspired a group of contemporaries to expand the cultural side of medicine by his writings and by the impact of his forceful personality. In America, his adopted country, he left an enduring stamp on humanistic studies and on the history of medicine.

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